
ACUPUNCTURE—

Answers to Common Questions

These questions and answers are taken from a discussion with Clayton Elizabeth Spivey, Licensed Acupuncturist, practicing in Columbia, Maryland. This information may help you decide if acupuncture is for you.

☯ How does acupuncture work?

Many people are curious about the mechanism of acupuncture. Western scientific studies show that acupuncture points have electrical properties and that the energy pathways are similar to the nervous system.

The acupuncturist is trained to assess where the channels of energy are blocked, and to open them so that energy may flow more freely and smoothly to support the body's normal complex physiological processes.

Exactly how it works is still a mystery. But it was only about twenty years ago that science discovered how aspirin worked. Not knowing, however, never kept people from using it (or doctors from prescribing it) to make them feel better.

Acupuncture has been used successfully for 3000 years—the longest clinical trial in history!

☯ Will it work for my problem?

Acupuncture diagnosis uses symptoms (physical or emotional) to point the professional acupuncturist toward treating the correct energy pathways (called “meridians”).

The acupuncturist looks at the whole person, not just at the symptom. Thus, one person with a headache may be treated differently from another person with a headache since the pain may be due to very different causes. If you treat only the symptom (ie: the pain) you run the risk of ignoring a potentially serious problem that may only show up after a great deal of damage (often irreversible) has been done.

Remember that “symptoms” are not only physical. Acupuncture can assist those who are wrestling with depression, anger, fear, grieving, poor sleep, etc. Acupuncturists make little distinction between concerns of the body, mind, and spirit.

☯ I don't have anything wrong with me. Why should I consider acupuncture?

If you are feeling well and happy, you may not need acupuncture, although acupuncture has been used as a preventative tool throughout history. You don't have to have any major problems for acupuncture to be beneficial. However, “not having anything wrong” may be different from “healthy.”

Do you continue to have small, annoying concerns? Perhaps you are more tired than you should be for your age and condition. Maybe you would like more focus and direction, or more ability to experience joy. Maybe you catch colds too often, digestive problems limit your enjoyment of food, or you get “the blues” during a particular season. Maybe you are just not as satisfied with your life as you wish you were.

Physical or emotional symptoms are often the “tip of the iceberg” and show up after an imbalance has gone unrecognized for quite awhile. For example, angina (chest pain) often occurs only after the blood vessels around the heart are over 75% occluded. Does that mean a person is “healthy” when the vessels are only 74% blocked?

Acupuncture is an alternative treatment in the United States but traditional in China. It's effective for arthritis, asthma, pains, and addictions, and it even works on animals.

Acupuncture can help ill conventional medicine cannot...It's also relatively cheap and painless.

🌀 **What about the needles? I'm afraid of needles.**

This is a very common concern. Most people feel quite relieved when they see the needles that an acupuncturist uses. The needles are approximately the thickness of a human hair and rarely longer than one inch. They are solid, not hollow, so nothing gets injected or withdrawn. They are made of stainless steel, and are disposable, so they are discarded after each use. Never, *ever*, are needles re-used from patient to patient (or even from body part to body part on the same patient) so disease transmission is not possible.

In any given acupuncture treatment, it is unusual for any more than two or three points to be needled. (The pictures in the popular press of people looking like they have been attacked by porcupines makes for a good picture, but this rarely occurs.) Most people feel a tingling or an ache when a needle is inserted, but any discomfort is momentary. If this is the only thing keeping you from experiencing acupuncture, ask to see a needle. It is also possible, if your fear or concern is still present, to have "acupuncture" without using needles. But please investigate by talking to an acupuncturist before you make up your mind on this basis alone.

🌀 **How much does it cost?**

The initial appointment is a two-hour diagnostic interview and physical examination. The cost is \$165. Thereafter, acupuncture treatments (about an hour in length) cost \$75.

Many clients find that their health insurance covers some of the cost—call your insurance representative and ask. If you are not insured or if the costs are still too high, discuss possible financial arrangements with your practitioner.

🌀 **How will I know it is working?**

When I was a child, I remember asking my mother how I'd know if I were in love. She told me, "Don't worry, you'll know."

It's the same with acupuncture. Your acupuncturist will take a detailed history, and it's at that point you may begin to note some of the details of how your own body works. After the first treatment you might notice changes that are very subtle (or not so subtle!) By the sixth or seventh treatment, you should be able to notice some very distinct changes and improvements in how you feel, some of which you might not have even expected.

A patient of mine felt no sensation in her breast since a tumor was removed about ten years previously. When she began treatment, she began to have breast tenderness. She was actually irritated until she realized that the soreness signaled a return to feeling that she had not experienced for over ten years!

Remember, though, that acupuncture is a natural form of healing and is, therefore, slower and more gentle than drugs or surgery. A compensation for the slowness, if you need one, is that there are no side effects.

🌀 **How often should I get a treatment?**

Acupuncture seeks to "re-train" your energy into health. Like any training program, the goal is to "coach" more often in the beginning, until the new ways are learned, and gradually let the energy maintain itself.

While each individual is unique, and a treatment plan will be specifically designed for your needs, the usual plan is for weekly treatments for about six to ten weeks, then every other week, then every three weeks, etc. Then visits are encouraged at the change of seasons to help maintain the balance that has been achieved.

I encourage people do this maintenance for themselves, similar to what they may do for their automobiles without question. Of course, treatments encourage you to pay more attention to your body and mind, so if you feel as if closer treatment spacing is beneficial, then it is possible to do that.

☉ I'm already working with a physician (or psychotherapist). I don't want my caregivers to work at cross-purposes.

Quite right. Acupuncturist often collaborate with physicians and therapists, supporting the treatments the patient is getting from other professionals. I like to know my patients are getting all available support.

Many of my patients are referred by physicians or therapists who have discovered that healing is enhanced and can happen more quickly with acupuncture.

☉ My doctor has referred me to specialists. They recommended surgery (chemotherapy, medications, physical therapy, etc.). Will acupuncture be useful, too?

Talk with an acupuncturist. Depending on your unique concern, acupuncture treatments could help prepare you for the trauma of surgery or could help you avoid or forestall it.

Sometimes, surgery is the best alternative, and should be pursued without question. Acupuncture can then be used to adjust the underlying problem that led to the need for surgery in the first place (for unless the underlying problem is corrected, surgery may be needed again).

For cancer, chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation is the very best course of action that western medicine has to offer, and discussions with your oncologist can lead you to the best choice of action. There is no reason that you cannot *add* acupuncture to your other treatments.

Acupuncture is recognized for pain control, limiting the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation, and for helping to bolster the courage one needs to go through the ordeal of life-threatening illness. Many specialists recommend acupuncture to support patients in both chronic and acute conditions.

☉ How do I choose an acupuncturist?

First, check on the qualifications of your acupuncturist. In Maryland, you should be sure your acupuncturist is licensed by the Maryland Acupuncture Board.

Make sure that your acupuncturist has completed a rigorous, accredited, academic and clinical program in acupuncture. (Medical doctors, chiropractors and some others licensed professionals may be allowed to practice acupuncture without training or with minimal training, such as a 200- hour course). A professional acupuncturist will have graduated from an accredited training program in acupuncture.

For example, I have a Master of Acupuncture degree (M.Ac.) from the Traditional Acupuncture Institute. The Institute's M.Ac. program is accredited by the National Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, which in turn is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. I have taken over 3000 hours (3-year graduate program, full-time) in the study of acupuncture, and I continue to learn through continuing education programs.

Another credential demonstrating competence is "Dipl.Ac." (Diplomate of Acupuncture) – Board Certification by the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists (NCCA). This credential means that the acupuncturist has passed a rigorous written and practical national examination.

Aside from professional qualifications, you should feel comfortable with your acupuncturist. Feel free to ask questions and express your concerns. If your questions and concerns are not satisfied, interview another acupuncturist. Don't just say that acupuncture is not for you.

Of course, if you ask around to friends and relatives, chances are you will find someone who is happy with acupuncture treatment. Referrals by satisfied patients are a great way to be sure that you will be satisfied too.

But, a word of warning: if you hear an acupuncturist promising "cures," run the other way as fast as you can. No responsible medical professional promises cures.

In a national survey of acupuncture patients, 90% reported "disappearance" or "improvement" of symptoms after treatment

☺ **The closest acupuncturist is 20 miles away. That's too far.**

This statement always puzzles me. People often don't think twice about going that far to the theater, to a ball game, or to have dinner with a friend.

If traveling is physically difficult for you, maybe you need to look into carpooling to treatments or arranging travel when someone can drive you. However, for most of us, scheduling the time and being willing to invest the time and energy in our own care is the real issue.

A patient of mine from Virginia (travel time: an hour, one way) says that it is a time she takes "for herself." She often spends a few more hours having dinner, or walking around enjoying a Columbia lake.

Ask yourself if you are worth it. But, if you are looking to address your high blood pressure, and refuse to consider an acupuncturist more than five minutes from your high pressure, downtown office, then you may need to reflect upon your lifestyle!

☺ **Do I have to believe in it for it to work? I mean, are we talking about mind over matter?**

I see nothing wrong with using a belief system to enhance healing, but that's another discussion. In the case of acupuncture, it has been proven to be effective in the treatment of animals, whose belief structure is not involved. They don't know that they are expected to get better with acupuncture, so they are not motivated to please us by doing so. These animal studies are some of the most convincing demonstrations of acupuncture's effectiveness to some of the most disbelieving of critics.

☺ **OK. I've heard enough to spark my interest. What do I do next??**

Just pick up the phone and call me:

- To ask any particular questions not answered in this brochure.
- To schedule, if you would like one, a 20-minute personal consultation at no charge.
- To schedule your first appointment.

It's that easy!

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In a national survey of acupuncture patients, the most popular words chosen to describe the patient's relationship with his or her practitioner were "guide," "partner," and "friend."